

# Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name?

A Review of the Literature

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## 1 About

This literature review aims to encapsulate existing research on the executive headteacher (EHT) position in England, building on the work of Fellows (2016). It covers three main areas: the history of EHTs in England; the skills, qualities and motivations identified in EHTs by existing literature; and the governance and school structures associated with EHTs. The review also aims to place the English EHT in an international context by identifying similar executive leadership positions in decentralised and semi-decentralised education systems in other countries.

## 2 Introduction

EHTs are often defined as any headteacher with oversight of more than one school (Chapman *et al.*, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2006; Hummerstone 2012; NCSL 2010). This means that an EHT either:

1. becomes the substantive headteacher of more than one school
2. remains the substantive headteacher of his or her current school whilst becoming the strategic leader of one or more other schools, or
3. has no substantive headship in any school but remains the strategic leader of a chain, federation or collaboration of schools

(Fellows, 2016).

Despite this, there are many cases where headteachers of one school have gone by the title of EHT. Indeed, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL, 2010), Fellows (2016) and Hummerstone (2012) each

found at least one example of an EHT operating in a single school only. Hummerstone (2012) stated that an EHT may be employed in a single school where the school needs a more 'outward-facing' leader; either from a local, a national, an international or a business perspective. On the other hand, there have also been examples of leaders of two or more schools going by the title of headteacher or chief executive officer (CEO) (Hummerstone, 2012; Fellows 2016; NCSL, 2010). The NCSL found that, in 2010, 28 per cent of leaders of more than one school went by the title of 'headteacher' rather than EHT.

This has led to there being no clear consensus amongst educational professionals or academics on what the roles, responsibilities and deployment of EHTs should look like. This ambiguity has attracted criticism from various groups across the education sector. The School Teachers Review Body (STRB) and the National Governors' Association (NGA) have raised concerns surrounding the legal status of EHTs and the varying contexts in which they are employed. In 2013, the NGA outlined that:

*The NGA accepts that given the changing landscape and variety of different models that have emerged, finding a single description that encompasses all arrangements would be difficult, but it should surely be possible to include some core responsibilities that an 'executive head' must be carrying out to qualify as an executive head (NGA, 2013).*

The STRB concurred with the NGA's view in its *Twenty Third Report* (2014) stating that there 'is no precise definition of what the role entails

and the variety of structures under such leadership are often driven by specific local circumstances'.

This lack of clarity around the role of the EHT is largely driven by three factors. Firstly, unlike the term 'headteacher', which is defined under Section 35 and 36 of the Education Act 2002, there is no legal definition of what an EHT is or what they should do. This has left the door open to a sector-led interpretation of what the role entails which, whilst being a practical development, has subsequently created multiple interpretations of what an EHT looks like. Secondly, until 2010 the literature on the role had generally provided only 'a partial account of developments on the ground' and had, for the most part, been 'descriptive rather than analytic' (Chapman *et al.*, 2008). It was not until the NCSL produced its landmark report, *Executive Heads* (2010), that any substantial data was collected and analysed on the role and deployment of EHTs across England.

Thirdly, the research on the role is now somewhat outdated, particularly in light of major/substantial changes to structural and managerial arrangements in schools over the past 16 years. The 2010 NCSL report was the last substantial study on EHTs, with two small follow-up pieces published two years later (Blackburn, 2012; Hummerstone, 2012).

### 3 The rise of the EHT in England

The significant and frequent changes in English education since the passage of the Education Reform Act 1988 have resulted in a landscape of governance and accountability that remains poorly understood (Chapman, 2013). There are, however, particular identifiable trends that can be associated with the creation and growth of EHT positions.

According to a parliamentary review, the term 'executive headteacher' first came into being in 2004 and, by 2010, there were 450 across England (NCSL, 2010). Nevertheless, the idea of headteachers having oversight of more than one school has been on the policy agenda since 1997. As part of the *Fresh Start* initiative, New Labour announced that outstanding headteachers would be allowed to run two schools in order to allow a 'less successful school ... to stand on its own two feet again' (Blair, 1997). This initiative was, nevertheless, always intended to be temporary and was not successfully implemented (Araujo, 2009). Although there are still many examples of EHTs being employed temporarily to improve education in an underperforming school, large numbers of EHTs are now employed on a permanent basis to oversee a group of schools.

In many ways the rise of the modern EHT in England is part of wider managerial, governance and structural changes over the past two decades. As well as making provisions for academies, the Education Act 2002 allowed schools to form formal groups; either as federations or multi-academy trusts (MATs). This made it more practical for governing boards to create shared leadership arrangements across multiple schools. Indeed, headteachers interviewed by Barrett-Baxendale and Burton (2009) predicted their future responsibilities would 'be that of a senior agent in a federation of schools'. Following the introduction of the Academies Act 2010, which made it easier for maintained schools to convert to academy status, significant numbers of schools chose to 'academise'. Figures from the Department for Education as of May 2016 show that there are now 5302 academies in England; 1606 of which are

'sponsored', meaning that they are more likely to be part of a MAT (DfE, 2016).

The rise of the EHT can be attributed to this changing educational landscape. Howarth (2015) found that some governing boards of federations appointed an EHT in order to implement a shared vision, and have consistent leadership, across the group. There is also far more of an emphasis on educational leadership as the most vital element of education improvement in popular and academic discourse (Chapman, 2013, citing Payne, 2008).

The EHT role may also support the increased use of managerial accountability mechanisms in the public sector, which replace or supplement political and collegial accountability mechanisms (Mattei, 2007; Møller, 2009). The declining role of local education authorities (LEAs) in English schools, and the greater autonomy of school leaders has also likely contributed to their emergence. English secondary schools are amongst the most autonomous in the OECD (2012) and the EHT, as part of the administrative structures of many MATs and federations, has the potential to pick up some of the administrative 'slack' left by the diminished LEA. This is in addition to providing oversight and ensuring that schools remain accountable to someone.

#### 4 The EHT in international context

While the EHT title is unique to the UK, similar roles exist in the education sector of other industrialised countries and are by no means new. As early as 1966, Campbell (1966) called for American school superintendents to be an 'educational purposer, organizational designer,

resource politician', a job description remarkably similar to that of a twenty-first century EHT as found by Fellows (2016) above. Other positions similar to EHTs found by Fellows (2016) are identifiable in public school systems around the world, where senior administrators in a 'supra-school' or 'inter-school' hold similar responsibilities to those of EHTs, including ensuring accountability and consistency across schools; engaging with local communities; and managing budgets, school properties and human resources.

Large American charter school networks, such as the Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP, 2016) are organised into regional groups of schools, overseen by a local superintendent or executive director, whilst smaller charter school networks have a similar structure to a small or medium-sized English MAT (Altman, 2016, personal communication). The Flemish *Scholengemeenschappen* networks of schools are overseen by a network coordinator, typically a former principal of one of the schools in the network (Feys and Devos, 2015). In the Dutch school system secondary schools can have 'Cluster Directors', who are responsible for a small group of schools (Bal and de Jong, 2007). Large school boards in the Canadian province of Ontario, such as the Peel District School Board (2016) or the Toronto District School Board (2016), employ superintendents, who oversee groups of three to six secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. Superintendents are accountable to locally elected trustees and the provincially appointed director of education that leads each school board. Valli *et al.* (2016) identified 'site coordinators' responsible for managing relationships between a school or schools and the local community. In the countries discussed above

education is relatively decentralised, while in more centralised systems, such as France (Cole, 2001; Daun, 2011; Daun and Siminou, 2005), it is difficult to identify roles analogous to that of an EHT.

## 5 Scoping the profile of EHTs

Unfortunately, there have been few attempts to scope the profile of EHTs in England. Official statistics on the prevalence of EHTs can be found in the Schools Workforce Census (SWC) and Edubase, yet these have not been utilised for this purpose over the past few years.

A small scale scoping exercise, conducted by the recently established National Executive Headteachers Network, did find that the 'typical profile of an executive headteacher' is a 'professional aged 46 to 60, with 30 years of teaching experience and ten years of prior headship experience' (Aubrey-Smith, 2015). Aside from this, the only major attempt to scope the profile of EHTs in England was conducted in 2010. NCSL's (2010) *Executive Heads* report was based on a desktop review, a survey of 345 EHTs, and face-to-face interviews with EHTs, governors and stakeholders. All of the EHTs surveyed by the NCSL had qualified teacher status (QTS), but only 15 per cent had previously held an executive headship before taking up their post. The survey found that most EHTs were over 50 years old, with only a third aged between 25 and 55; the largest proportion of EHTs were aged between 56 and 60. Only 13 per cent of EHTs had been appointed through an advertised recruitment process with most being approached directly, either by the employing schools or the local authority.

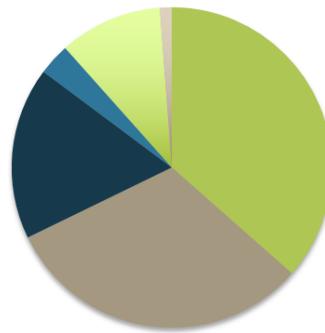
The NCSL research also found that the majority of EHTs operated in primary schools (64 per cent), with only 23 per cent being responsible for a secondary school. In addition, most of the EHTs surveyed oversaw either two primaries (37 per cent) or a combination of nursery and primary schools (35 per cent). A small minority of the EHTs surveyed oversaw two secondaries (16 per cent) or another type of combination, such as a cross-phase collaboration (eight per cent). The survey also found that EHTs were responsible for anything between 54 and 3300 pupils. For EHTs who oversaw more than one secondary, this figure was between 294 and 3300 pupils (with a median of 1780 pupils). However, for primary EHTs, who made up the bulk of the respondents, the number of pupils under their remit ranged from 54 to 1330 (with a median of only 274 pupils). The NCSL did not report on the gender profile of EHTs.

## 6 Governance, structures and models of executive headship

As much of the literature on EHTs was written prior to the Academies Act 2010, there is little research on how EHTs work within MATs. Indeed, the NCSL report (2010) only briefly discussed MATs as an emerging trend in EHT structures and, from its survey, the NCSL did not find any EHTs operating in MATs. Figure 1 shows the EHT structures that the NCSL did identify in 2010 from 345 EHTs.

**Figure 1. Structures under an EHT model in 2010**

- Collaboration/partnership with each school having its own governing board (36.5%)
- Federation with one governing board for all schools (31.3%)
- Executive head performing an interim role (17.4%)
- Informal School Structure (3.2%)
- Not stated (10.4%)
- Other (1.2%)



Source: NCSL, 2010.

The NCSL (2010) report also found that 90 per cent of EHTs operated in two schools, with only ten per cent operating in three or more. Therefore, it did not account for the complex executive management structures and division of responsibilities that often exist in large groups of schools. In particular, there is limited discussion of the relationship between EHTs, chief executives and executive directors. This is no doubt due to the fact that these structures were still emerging at the time the NCSL (2010) report was published.

The current literature does, however, provide an insight into the relationship between the EHT and the governing board. Fellows (2016) and the NCSL (2010) found examples of EHTs being held to account by both standalone and multiple governing boards, with some EHTs signing

multiple employment contracts and having duplicated performance management arrangements. In MATs and federations, the trustees and governors are free to decide their own schemes of delegation (National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2014a, 2014b) and 'if governors, trustees or members do not understand what to expect from an EHT they cannot be expected to delegate responsibility across their schools effectively' (Fellows, 2016). The recent financial notice to improve from the Education Funding Agency (EFA) to Perry Beeches Academy Trust is a clear, if extreme, example of how poor governance and misunderstanding of the EHT role can have serious consequences, with the Trust employing the same person as both the EHT and the chief executive (EFA, 2016). Anxiety around forming formal structures can also prevent governing boards engaging positively with EHTs. A survey conducted by Barnes (2006) found that governing boards of schools forming or joining a group can often be sceptical of an EHT's intentions due a lack of understanding about what the role entails.

## 7 Skills associated with executive headship

One of the most widely covered topics in the literature on executive headship concerns the skills required to be an EHT. The NGA's *What Makes a Headteacher 'Executive'?* (Fellows, 2016) provides a useful overview. In brief, the literature identifies five key skillsets and qualities as integral to the role of EHTs:

**Table 1. Breakdown of the Skills Associated with an EHT**

<b>Strategic thinking and operations</b> (Barnes, 2006; Barnes <i>et al.</i> , 2005; Hummerstone, 2012; NCSL, 2010).	<b>Relationship building</b> (Chapman <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Harris <i>et al.</i> , 2006; Hummerstone, 2012; NCSL, 2010).
<b>Resilience, leadership and maturity</b> (Barnes, 2006; Hummerstone, 2012; NCSL, 2010).	<b>A strong moral purpose</b> (Barnes, 2006; Chapman <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Harris <i>et al.</i> , 2006; Hummerstone, 2012)
<b>Ability to promote growth and development</b>  (Chapman <i>et al.</i> , 2011).	

Source: Fellows, 2016.

Executive headteachers are generally perceived to be less involved with operational management in their schools and must therefore have the ability to step away from the day-to-day (NCSL, 2010; Hummerstone, 2012); focusing instead on school performance and planning from a 'whole school' perspective (Harris *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, EHTs must also have a clear vision and show their ability to work well with governors (NCSL, 2010; Hummerstone, 2012). The literature emphasises the need for EHTs to 'shape direction' (Harris *et al.*, 2006), 'secure moral purpose', to bring about swift changes, and to increase the capacity of the leadership within their schools (Harris *et al.*, 2006; Hummerstone, 2012; NCSL, 2010).

The literature also discusses the need for EHTs to be 'even handed' with the schools under their control and have the skills to understand complex systems and trends across their organisation (NCSL, 2010; Hummerstone, 2012). The NCSL (2010) note it as a strength when EHTs are able to get the balance right between creating consistency across an organisation and accepting that schools have their differences.

Executive headteachers are also perceived to have a role in building relationships with stakeholders. They must have good interpersonal skills, demonstrating an ability to communicate well and build partnerships through the use of their 'entrepreneurial and political' acumen (Hummerstone, 2012; NCSL, 2010). In addition, the literature emphasises that EHTs must be resilient, mature and have the ability to be 'optimistic, uncompromising and put faith in others' (Barnes, 2006). Finally, Hummerstone (2012) also states that EHTs must show 'mature behaviours of self-worth, patience and genuine humility'.

As the NCSL (2010) outline, however, EHTs are often employed by schools (or groups of schools) under a range of different circumstances. Indeed, the report outlines that EHTs can be appointed because:

- *a school is failing or underperforming*
- *a school has failed to recruit a head or is at risk of closure unless it teams up with another school(s)*
- *schools in a locality or town want to adopt a broad-based multiagency approach to education and child development*
- *schools decide to form a partnership or federation focused on improving teaching and learning through shared professional and curriculum development*

- a school trust or academy sponsor decides to develop a group or chain of schools.

The skills needed to be an EHT differ greatly depending on the reason why an EHT is employed, with EHTs needing different abilities in order to tackle underperformance in a weak school or, on the other hand, expand a trust or federation (Fellows, 2016). In addition, the size of the organisation greatly influences the skills needed:

*On one end of the spectrum, a pair of small schools that join together for greater sustainability may have an EHT whose role differs little from that of a headteacher of a single large school. In contrast, the EHT of a large chain of secondary schools may take a far more strategic role, spend little time in his/her schools and require a completely different skillset.*

(Fellows, 2016).

A study conducted by Blackburn (2012) compared the skills needed to be a 'generic' (type not defined) EHT, as identified by Barnes (2006), with the specific skills needed to be an EHT of a federation. Based on interview data Blackburn found that, although similar, there were some subtle differences in the skills needed for these two sub-groups of EHT:

**Table 2. Comparison between different types of EHTs**

Barnes (2006) Skills needed to be an EHT	Blackburn (2012) Skills needed to be an EHT of a federation
'Strategic: exhibiting faith in others (trust, strategic thinking)'	'Strategic: communication, commitment to developing others, having a strong vision, belief'
'Operational: modelling'	'Operational: managing competing demands, personal organisation'
'Personal: resilience, optimism, developing positive relationships'	'Personal: enthusiasm, interpersonal skills'

Source: Adapted from Blackburn, 2012.

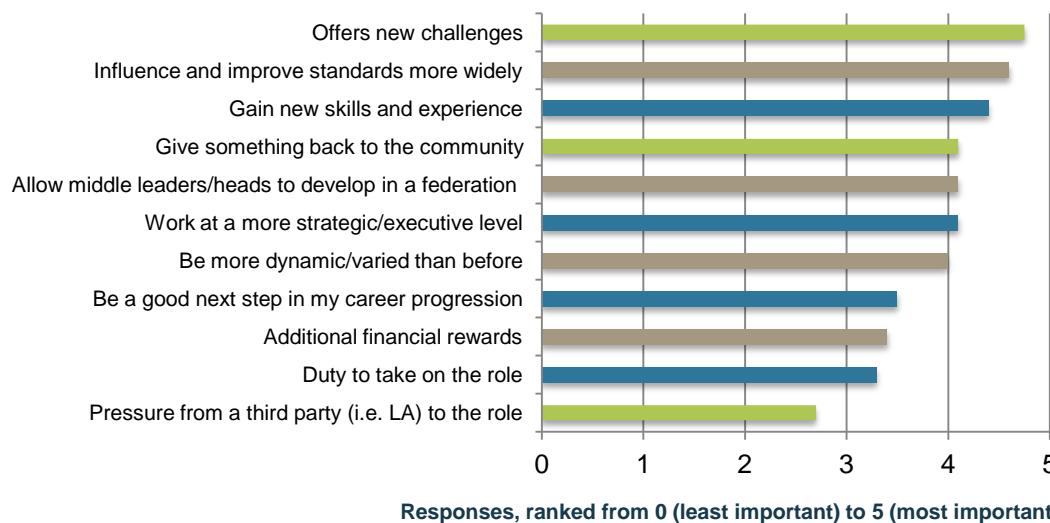
It is clear, therefore, that EHTs require similar yet different skills depending on the context in which they are employed. Without a clear understanding of the role and deployment of EHTs in modern structures, it is not possible to know what skills they will require to fulfil their core functions.

## 8 Motivations for becoming an EHT

The NCSL (2010) survey also gave an insight into the motivations of EHTs taking on the role. The survey gave respondents a list of ten factors to choose from as to why they took on executive headship. They were then asked to rank these reasons from one (not important) to five (very

important). Figure 2 (below) outlines the different motivations for taking on the role listed by the 345 EHTs surveyed as part of the NCSL research.

**Figure 2. Survey data, adapted from NCSL (2010), showing the motivations for respondents becoming an EHT**



Source: adapted from NCSL, 2010.

## 9 The impact made by EHTs

The NCSL (2010) report notes two overarching areas of 'impact' that an EHT can make in schools. Firstly, the NCSL suggest that having one EHT to oversee multiple schools can, if the leadership team is structured correctly, be more cost effective than having individual headteachers for numerous schools. Secondly, the NCSL argue that having an EHT can

help improve the capacity of leadership in schools, as EHTs often assist in attracting and recruiting senior leaders; boosting 'leadership capacity' by freeing up other leaders' time to focus on management rather than teaching; and offering other school leaders a chance to take on more responsibility for the day-to-day operations of their schools.

The NCSL (2010) report, drawing on Barnes (2006), also notes that EHTs can make a direct impact on the outcomes of a school by:

- using their experience in raising standards, and understanding what it takes to make a school good
- being able to transfer systems from one school and apply these to
- an underperforming school
- being able to encourage collaboration and coaching between leaders in good and underperforming schools, particularly around management structures, behaviour, learning and achievement
- clarifying and improving the focus of staff across a number of schools, and
- being able to create an ethos and culture which challenges underperformance, enhances confidence and encourages a 'can-do' approach.

These findings, however, should be treated with caution. Although they offer a useful starting point in assessing the impact made by EHTs, the NCSL (2010) survey focuses primarily on the impact that EHTs make on small primary groups (e.g. giving leaders time to manage instead of teach and helping to attract staff to small schools) and not on larger groups or secondary schools. In addition, Barnes (2006) concentrates on the impact made by EHTs who oversee both a good and an underperforming school.

Indeed, although there are federations and MATs consisting of a mix of high and low performing schools, some MATs and federations are made up entirely of high-performing schools or entirely of low-performing schools.

## 10 Conclusion

From reviewing the literature it is clear that further research is required in order to understand the current deployment of EHTs and their roles and responsibilities. In particular the full range of structures, including MAT models, needs to be taken into account in order to see where EHTs 'fit' in the current education landscape.

This literature review builds upon an initial interim study conducted by Fellows (2016) and accompanies the report *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? A Full Report of the Findings* (Lord *et al.*, 2016).

*Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? A Full Report of the Findings* is a joint document produced by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), the National Governors' Association (NGA), and The Future Leaders Trust (TFLT), the aim of which is to address many of the gaps identified in this review and understand the role, deployment and profile of EHTs in England. The research will help to inform policy makers and practitioners on how EHTs fit within the current education system and provide information on what can be done to support them, and their colleagues and governors, in their role.

## Appendix 1 – Literature Review Methodology

This literature review was conducted in April and May 2016 and builds on earlier research conducted by Fellows (2016). The aim of the review was to establish an understanding of published research and policy documents on the development of the EHT role, the skills and qualities associated with EHTs and the policy contexts that have contributed to the growth of EHTs. The goal was to support the main report on executive headship in England – *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name?*.

As the EHT has been subject to comparatively little study there were no standard or set key words that could be used to identify relevant literature. References to EHTs in some of the literature are indirect or subsidiary to the literature's key focus. Instead we used the following free text terms: 'executive headteachers', 'education AND executive leadership' 'education policy England' and 'educational governance'. Inclusion criteria were: publications only in the English language, and a focus on literature published in the last decade (aside from that referred to in the background and international context sections).

The primary sources for academic literature were Google Scholar and the Bodleian Libraries SOLO databases. The academic literature cited comes from the fields of education and public administration, and focuses on the changing policies, structures and priorities of the English state education system. English policy documents and research reports are from the National College for Teaching and Leadership and its predecessors, and the Department for Education. The skills and qualities of EHTs were drawn from guidance documents published by the National College for

Teaching and Leadership. Foreign policy documents were located in the OECD iLibrary and the websites of local and charter school boards.

Countries that could have similar positions to EHTs were identified through the OECD's 2012 *Education at a Glance* report by identifying countries with less centralised education systems, that is, those with substantial numbers of educational decisions being made at a school, local or regional level.

This literature review should not be considered a comprehensive review of all published literature on EHTs. Because the EHT is a relatively new and still poorly understood phenomenon, because direct analysis of the EHT is uncommon, and because the EHT title appears unique to the English state school system, it is not currently possible to account for all research that relates in some way to EHTs. This review does, however, provide a starting point for turning the subject of EHTs into a proper field of study. It makes a substantial contribution towards the work of other researchers seeking to understand the EHT role.

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# Outputs suite

## A Full Report of the Findings

The full report of findings, including key messages and recommendations for policy and practice, why executive headteachers (EHTs) matter, the distinctive characteristics and distribution of EHTs, the circumstances under which schools appoint an EHT, and the facilitating factors, challenges, and development of the EHT role.

### How to cite this publication:

Lord, P., Wespieser, K., Harland, J., Fellows, T. and Theobald, K. (2016). *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? A Full Report of the Findings*. Slough, Birmingham and London: NFER, NGA and TFLT.

## Executive Summary

A two-page concise summary of the full report.

### How to cite this publication:

Theobald, K. and Lord, P. (2016). *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? Executive Summary*. Slough, Birmingham and London: NFER, NGA and TFLT.

## Technical Appendix

The technical appendix provides a detailed account of the methodology used to obtain the data on which the full report is based.

### How to cite this publication:

Harland, J. and Bernardinelli, D. (2016). *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? Technical Appendix*. Slough: NFER.

## Literature Review

The literature review encapsulates existing research on the EHT position in England. It covers three main areas: the history of EHTs in England; the skills, qualities and motivations identified in EHTs; and the governance and school structures associated with EHTs.

### How to cite this publication:

Fellows, T. and Odell, E. (2016). *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? A Review of the Literature*. Birmingham and London: NGA and TFLT.

## Case Study Compendium

The compendium provides an overview of each of the 12 case studies that were conducted as part of the research. Each case study includes a description of the setting, the purpose of appointing an EHT, the focus of the EHT role, qualifications of the EHT and replicable features.

### How to cite this publication:

Wespieser, K. (Ed) (2016). *Executive Headteachers: What's in a Name? Case Study Compendium*. Slough: NFER.

## Infographic Poster

The infographic poster – included in the full report - displays quantitative data about the distinctive characteristics and distribution of EHTs.

All outputs are available from the following websites:

[www.nfer.ac.uk](http://www.nfer.ac.uk)

[www.nga.org.uk](http://www.nga.org.uk)

[www.future-leaders.org.uk](http://www.future-leaders.org.uk)

## About the organisations who carried out this research



The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is the UK's largest independent provider of research, assessment and information services for education, training and children's services. Our purpose is to provide independent evidence which improves education and training for children and young people.

The research team at NFER for this project included: Daniele Bernardinelli, Jennie Harland, Pippa Lord, and Karen Wespieser.

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The National Governors' Association (NGA) is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. The NGA's goal is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We do this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. We also work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies, and are the only campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

The research team at NGA for this project included: Ellie Cotgrave and Tom Fellows.

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The Future Leaders Trust's mission is to give children equal opportunities in life, regardless of background, by developing a network of exceptional school leaders. We run a range of leadership development programmes, providing a progression pathway from middle leadership right through to system leadership. All of the programmes are informed by evidence and the expertise of leaders within and beyond education. They all support participants to develop more effective leadership behaviours, so they can drive improvement in schools and multi-academy trusts and help close the attainment gap.

The research team at TFLT for this project included: Evan Odell, Katy Theobald and Rosaria Votta.

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